

SYLLABUS

Spring 2021

083-320-001: Social Science Seminar – Rethinking Progress

Online class. Meets over Zoom on Tuesday, 10:50-12:05, otherwise asynchronous.

Professor Mariano Torras, Ph.D., torrasm@adelphi.edu, HHE 306, 516-877-4644

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Case, A., and A. Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

Harari, Y.N., *Sapiens*, Harper Perennial, 2015.

Pinker, S., *Enlightenment Now*, Penguin, 2018.

Wilkerson, I., *Caste*, Random House, 2020.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

Graeber, D., *Bullshit Jobs*, Simon and Shuster, 2018.

King, C.W., *The Economic Superorganism*, Springer, 2021.

Kuhn, T., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press., 1962.

Lasch, C., *The True and Only Heaven*, W.W. Norton, 1991.

Mau, S., *The Metric Society*, Polity Press., 2019.

COURSE PREREQUISITES / COREQUISITES:

None

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE:

The Covid-19 pandemic is only the most recent, though possibly also most acute, of the numerous challenges human society confronts in the early 21st century. Climate, finance, inequality – social, racial, and gender – artificial intelligence, bioethics, epidemiology, and geopolitics are some of the principal areas characterized by immense uncertainty in the coming years and decades. This is the present-day context in which we will revisit and explore the notion of progress. What *is* progress? In which ways is it – or is it *not* – a uniquely human concern? In what ways, according to the historical record, can we say that “progress” describes our collective experience? (In what ways does it not?) And perhaps most important, do our present-day challenges represent a major departure from humanity’s historical trajectory?

OFFICE HOURS:

I will be available to meet on Zoom through most of the week. Just let me know *via email* when you would like to meet, and I will send you a zoom link for the agreed day/time. My “official” office hours are Tuesdays from 3:00pm to 4:40pm and Wednesdays from 4:00pm to 5:00pm, but if you plan to see me then you must let me know ahead of time.

COMMUNICATION:

I always respond to email messages as quickly as possible, but sometimes will be delayed by a day or more – even more over the weekend. I never take offense to a gentle reminder in case I have not replied, so do not hesitate. For your part, you should check your email and our Moodle page on a regular basis for class-related announcements. It will also be on Moodle that you will be completing most of your assignments.

WEB CONFERENCE EXPECTATIONS:

Since we will be meeting remotely on a weekly basis, there are a few protocols and behaviors that I would appreciate your following:

- 1) Please keep yourself muted while others are speaking so as to avoid distracting background noise.
- 2) If you have a question, please use the “raise hand” feature since I am more likely to notice you this way. You could also try Chat, but it would likely take me longer to notice that.
- 3) Use Zoom’s Reactions and/or Nonverbal Feedback icons to communicate without interrupting.
- 4) While we are having class, please do not open other tabs or programs that are not related to the course.

Please keep your camera turned on at all times, as it helps me see if you are understanding the material, or at least engaged in trying to. Doing so also fosters a stronger sense of community in the class. If you are not comfortable turning on your camera, you *must* speak with me privately about it.

ASSIGNMENTS/COURSEWORK:

Attendance:

» This is a 15-week course for which we will meet once weekly every Tuesday for synchronous classes. The remainder of the work for the class will be done asynchronously. I expect you to be present on Tuesdays, with your video “on.” I will not grant excused absences. HOWEVER, if you are absent *two or fewer* times during the semester, there will be no adverse impact on your grade

Class work:

» Regular attendance *and punctuality* are especially important in a seminar course such as this. I expect everyone to keep up with the weekly readings and regularly participate in classroom discussions. Your classwork grade will be composed of the following:

- General class participation
- Responses to weekly prompts
- Engagement with classmates on Moodle
- Discussion leading

Weekly posts:

- » You will be required to post on Moodle your answer to a weekly prompt based on the assigned readings. I will require you to do this 12 times during the semester (you are responsible for keeping count). You must, additionally, respond to at least two of your classmate's comments *a minimum* of six times during the semester. You may respond more than six times and receive some extra credit. Please avoid simple "I agree" type responses.
- » Your weekly answers must be between 400 and 800 words. These are strict rules, so please use the "word count" feature on Word or whatever software you are using. Combined responses to classmates must be at least 200 words (no upper bound here). Your answers to my prompts must be posted by 8pm on the Saturday preceding our next in-class discussion. Your responses to your classmates must be posted 24 hours later, by 8pm Sunday. For example, we are scheduled to discuss chapters from the Lasch and Pinker books on February 2nd. So, for these you need to answer one of the prompts on Moodle by January 30th at 8pm and respond to classmates by January 31st at 8pm. *Late postings do not receive credit.*

Discussion leading:

- » One of you each week will lead the discussion. What it will entail is posting your own prompt on Moodle by Monday at 8am at the latest. I would like you to post three *of your own* questions and/or comments about the preceding week's reading assignment.
- » Everyone else should address the questions/comments in their own posts, by the same day at 8pm – that is, 12 hours later. Think about it as part of your class participation grade, so don't sweat it if you have to miss a few weeks of this due to time constraints.
- » Finally, when it is your turn you will lead the class discussion the next day (Tuesday). Very informally, so again, no pressure (i.e., no slide presentation or anything, unless you WANT to). It would be perfectly ok just to prompt the class with any of the material covered on Moodle over the preceding three days.
 - I especially recommend that you also address some of your classmates' comments and/or responses.
 - Also, it would be especially nice if you related any elements of the week's readings to some current news.

Short papers:

- » I will also ask you to write three short papers during the semester. I will announce the details including due dates as I determine them. Each should be *strictly* between 1,000 and 1,500 words.

Check-in:

- » I will require each of you to "meet" with me privately (i.e., on Zoom) *at least once* during the semester, approximately halfway through. The meeting will be an informal "check-in" and opportunity to communicate privately about

anything you'd like regarding the course. It will also be an opportunity to ask any question not addressed in class.

GRADING/EVALUATION:

- » Class participation, 15 points
- » Weekly response to prompts, 30 points
- » Response to classmates, 15-24 points (1 extra point for each after 6)
- » Discussion leading, 10 points
- » Short papers, 30 points

Your final grade is determined on a 100-point scale. So, for example, if you earn 93 or more points before the end of the semester, you will earn an A for the course without the paper. Doing all the assignments is the key to obtaining a good grade. Please note that **there will be *no* opportunity for extra credit assignments.**

COURSE TOPICS OUTLINE

Social Science Seminar – Rethinking Progress
 083-320-001
 Spring 2021

DATE	DISCUSSION TOPIC	READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK
1/26	Introduction	Lasch, C. , Ch 1-2 Pinker, S. , Chs. 1-4
2/2	Progress, overview	Caradonna, J. (2014). "Is Progress Good for Humanity?" <i>The Atlantic</i> September, 5 pp. De Benoist, A. (2008). A Brief History of the Idea of Progress. <i>Occidental Quarterly</i> 8(1): 7-16. Fay, S. B. (1947). The Idea of Progress. <i>American Historical Review</i> 52(2): 231-246. Heinberg, R.H. (2011). Introduction. <i>The End of Growth</i> . New Society Publishers, pp. 1-25. Malik, K. (2018). "We Have Lost Faith in God – And in Reason." <i>Guardian Weekly</i> , June, p. 18. Sbert, J.M. (1992). "Progress." <i>Development Dictionary</i> . Zed Books, pp. 212-227.
2/9	Progress, overview (continued)	Pinker, S. , Chs 21-23 Tainter, J. (2000). Problem Solving: Complexity, History, Sustainability. <i>Population and Environment</i> 22(1): 3-41.
2/16	History	Harari, Y. , <i>Sapiens</i> .
2/23	History (continued)	Kuhn, T., Chs. 9-13

		Einstein, A. (1950). "Science and Religion." <i>Out of My Later Years</i> . New York: Philosophical Library. "2020 Visions" (2010). <i>Nature</i> 463 January 7, pp. 26-32.
3/2	Science, Technology, and Knowledge	Mau, S., Chs 1, and 9-10 Collison, P., and M. Nielsen (2018). "Science Is Getting Less Bang for its Buck." <i>The Atlantic</i> November, 9 pp. Davies, W. (2017). "How Statistics Have Lost their Power – And Why We Should Fear What Comes Next." <i>Guardian Weekly</i> January 19 th . Gleiser, M. (2018). "How Much Can We Know?" <i>Scientific American</i> June, pp. 72-73.
3/9	Science, Technology, and Knowledge, (continued)	Case, A. and A. Deaton , Ch 4, 10-12 Pinker, S. , Chs 9, 16 Graeber, D., Ch 5-6 Schumacher, E.F. (1973). "The Greatest Resource – Education." <i>Small is Beautiful</i> . Blond and Briggs, pp. 54-72. Snow, C.P. (1959). "The Two Cultures." <i>The Rede Lecture</i> . Cambridge University Press. 1-22
3/16	Race, Class, Education, and Culture	Wilkerson, I. , <i>Caste</i> . Oreskes, N. (2020). "Sexism and Racism Persist in Science." <i>Scientific American</i> October, p. 81.
3/23	Race, Class, Education, and Culture (continued)	Case, A., and A. Deaton , Chs 1-3, 5-9, 13 Pinker, S. , Chs. 5-7 Benatar, D. (2007). The Chickens Come Home to Roost. <i>American Journal of Public Health</i> 97(9): 1545-1546. Cocozza, P. (2020). The Human Strain. <i>The Guardian Weekly</i> , December, pp. 12-14. Sapolsky, R.M. (2018). "The Health-Wealth Gap." <i>Scientific American</i> November, pp. 63-67.
3/30	Public Health and Disease	Pinker, S. , Chs. 8, 17-18 Pritchett, L. (1997). Divergence, Big Time. <i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i> 11(3): 3-17. Rostow, W.W. (1959). The Stages of Economic Growth. <i>Economic History Review</i> 12(1): 1-16. Stiglitz, J. (2020). "Measuring What Matters." <i>Scientific American</i> , August, pp. 25-31.
4/6	Economic Growth and Development	King, C.W. , Ch 6 Gordon, R. (2012). "Is US Economic Growth Over? Faltering Innovation Confronts the Six Headwinds." Centre for Economic Policy Research, Policy Insight No. 63. Heinberg, R.E. (2011), Chs 2 and 6. Mishan, E.J. (1978). Whatever Happened to Progress? <i>Journal of Economic Issues</i> 12(2): 405-425.

4/13	Economic Growth and Development (continued)	<p>Pinker, S., Ch 10 King, C.W., Chs 1-4 Heinberg, R.E. (2011), Chs 3 and 4. McBride, P. (2020). The Last Quiet Places. <i>Smithsonian</i>, October, pp. 50-61. Summers, L. (1992). "Let Them Eat Pollution." <i>The Economist</i>.</p>
4/20	Environment Ethics and Sustainability	<p>Pinker, S., Chs. 11-15 Graeber, D., Ch 7</p>
4/27	Politics, Peace, and Democracy	<p>Pinker, S., Chs. 19-20 Anthes, E. (2017). "The Shape of Work to Come." <i>Nature</i> 550(19): 316-319. Allen, R.C. (2017). "Lessons from History for the Future of Work." <i>Nature</i> 550(19): 321-324. Harari, Y.N. (2017). "Reboot for the AI Revolution." <i>Nature</i> 550(19): 324-327. Goldin, I. (2017). "The Second Renaissance." <i>Nature</i> 550(19): 327-329. Khatchadourian, R. (2015). "The Doomsday Invention." <i>The New Yorker</i>, November 23rd.</p>
5/4	The Future of Progress	<p>Case, A., and A. Deaton, Chs 14-16 King, C.W., Chs. 9-10 Lasch, C., Ch 11 Heinberg, R.E. (2011), Ch 7. Turchin, P. (2010). Correspondence. <i>Nature</i> 463 Feb 4, p. 608. Wood, G. (2020). "The Next Decade Could Be Even Worse." <i>The Atlantic</i>, December 15 pp.</p>
5/11	The Future of Progress (continued)	None – finish work on your paper.
5/20		*Third Paper Due by noon